NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE

CONSERVATION PRACTICE STANDARD

CONSERVATION COVER

(Acre)

CODE 327

DEFINITION

Establishing and maintaining permanent vegetative cover to protect soil and water resources.

PURPOSES

- Reduce soil erosion and sedimentation.
- Improve water quality.
- Enhance wildlife habitat.

CONDITIONS WHERE PRACTICE APPLIES

This practice applies on land to be retired from agricultural production requiring permanent protective cover, and on other lands needing permanent protective cover. This practice does not apply to plantings for forage production or to critical area plantings.

CRITERIA

General Criteria Applicable to All Purposes

All forms of active erosion will be planned to acceptable soil loss levels for the field.

Existing practices should be technically evaluated for need of repair or for elimination.

Establishment of Cover

The Pasture and Hayland Planting (512) or the Range Planting (550) standards and specifications shall be used for determining adapted herbaceous grasses, legumes, and forbs. The Tree/Shrub Establishment (612) standard and specification shall be used for determining adapted trees and shrubs.

The above standards and specifications provide the criteria for species selection, adaptation, seeding rates, seedbed preparation, cover crop needs, planting dates, and establishment procedures.

When selecting and establishing conservation cover for other conservation practices, such as filter strips or windbreaks, refer to the species and establishment requirements listed in the standard for that practice.

Use of invasive species shall be avoided.

Legume seed shall be inoculated with the proper Rhizobia bacteria before planting.

Fertilizer applications will be in accordance with the Nutrient Management (590) standard and specification.

Timing and use of equipment shall be appropriate for the site and soil conditions. Do not use tillage when soil is wet so as to avoid developing soil compaction and hardpans.

Management of Plant Cover

All grass stands will maintain the number of plants per square foot as required for stand establishment. Refer to the Pasture and Hayland Planting (512) and Range Planting (550) standards and specifications ***Criteria for Determining Stand Establishment***. If the stand fails to provide the required plant density, reestablishment, additional seeding, fertilizing and/or other practices may be needed to achieve the desired stand density.

Replanting and maintenance of tree stands will be in accordance with the Tree/Shrub Establishment (612) standard and specifications.

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Vegetative manipulation will be accomplished by mechanical, biological, or chemical methods, or by prescribed burning, or a combination of the four.

Weed control will be applied when a 50% or greater canopy of undesirable weeds exists or 3 weed plants per square foot exists on 50% or more of the field. The use of herbicides will be in accordance with the Pest Management (595) standard and specification.

When undesirable brush species occupy an area of the field, brush will be controlled chemically or mechanically. Brush will be controlled consistent with guidance in the Brush Management (314) or Prescribed Burning (338) standards and specifications.

When forbs and legume species are established as a component of the vegetative cover, weed control measures will be planned to minimize the negative impacts on these species.

Noxious weeds will be controlled to prevent proliferation and spreading to adjacent fields.

Burning or mowing may be done to improve plant vigor over the life of the grass stand. Burning will be applied consistent with the Prescribed Burning (338) standard and specification. Mowing heights shall be in accordance with minimum cutting heights found in Table 1 of the Forage Harvest Management (511) standard and specification. Mowed forage will be shredded and will remain in place on the field.

Insect populations will be evaluated for threshold levels. When populations exceed threshold levels in the field or threaten adjacent lands, insect control will be applied consistent with the Pest Management (595) standard and specification.

Excessive Plant Residue on Established Fields

Fields with grass having residue amounts of $\geq$5000 lbs/ac shall be evaluated for signs of dead plant crowns and smothering of grass plants causing stand deterioration. Grasses should be evaluated during their appropriate growing season. Stands showing signs of deterioration due to excessive plant residue will have excess mulch removed mechanically or by burning.

Burning will be applied consistent with the Prescribed Burning (338) standard and specification. Mechanical removal will be consistent with the Forage Harvest management (511) standard and specification.

Additional Criteria for Enhancing Wildlife Habitat

Grasses, forbs, and legumes shall be planted in mixtures to encourage maximum plant diversity. Trees and shrubs can be planted on adapted sites to provide additional plant diversity and meet habitat requirements of targeted wildlife species. For additional guidance in determining plants for wildlife habitat, refer to the Restoration and Maintenance of Declining Habitats (643) standard and specification and current Biology Technical Notes.

The food and cover value of the planting can be enhanced by using a habitat evaluation procedure to aid in selecting plant species and providing or managing for other habitat requirements necessary to achieve the objective. Refer to the Wildlife Upland Habitat Management (645) standard and specification for habitat requirements.

Management methods used shall be designed to protect the soil resource from erosion.

Maintenance practices and activities such as mowing, should not be done between May 1 and July 1 so as not to disturb cover and nesting activity during the reproductive period for grassland wildlife species. Exceptions should be considered for periodic burning or mowing when necessary to maintain the health of the plant community.

CONSIDERATIONS

This practice may be used to promote the conservation of wildlife species in general, including threatened and endangered species.

To benefit insect food sources for grassland nesting birds, consider spraying or controlling weeds using “spot” spraying to protect forbs and legumes that benefit native pollinators and other wildlife.

Where applicable this practice may be used to conserve and stabilize archeological and historic sites.

Consider rotating management and maintenance activities (e.g. mow only one-fourth

or one-third of the area each year) throughout the managed area to maximize spatial and temporal diversity.

If a native cover (other than what was planted) establishes, and this cover meets the intended purpose and the landowner's objectives, the cover may be considered adequate.

If land is entering into a long-term contract, make species selections based on the management goal after the contract ends.

PLANS AND SPECIFICATIONS

Specifications for this practice shall be prepared for each site. They shall include, but are not limited to, recommended species, seeding rates and dates, establishment procedures, and other management actions needed to insure an adequate stand. Specifications shall be recorded using approved specifications sheets, job sheets, narrative statements in the conservation plan, or other acceptable documentation.

OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE

Weed control should only be performed to control noxious weeds or when weeds threaten the survival of the stand.

Any use of fertilizers, pesticides and other chemicals shall not compromise the intended purpose.